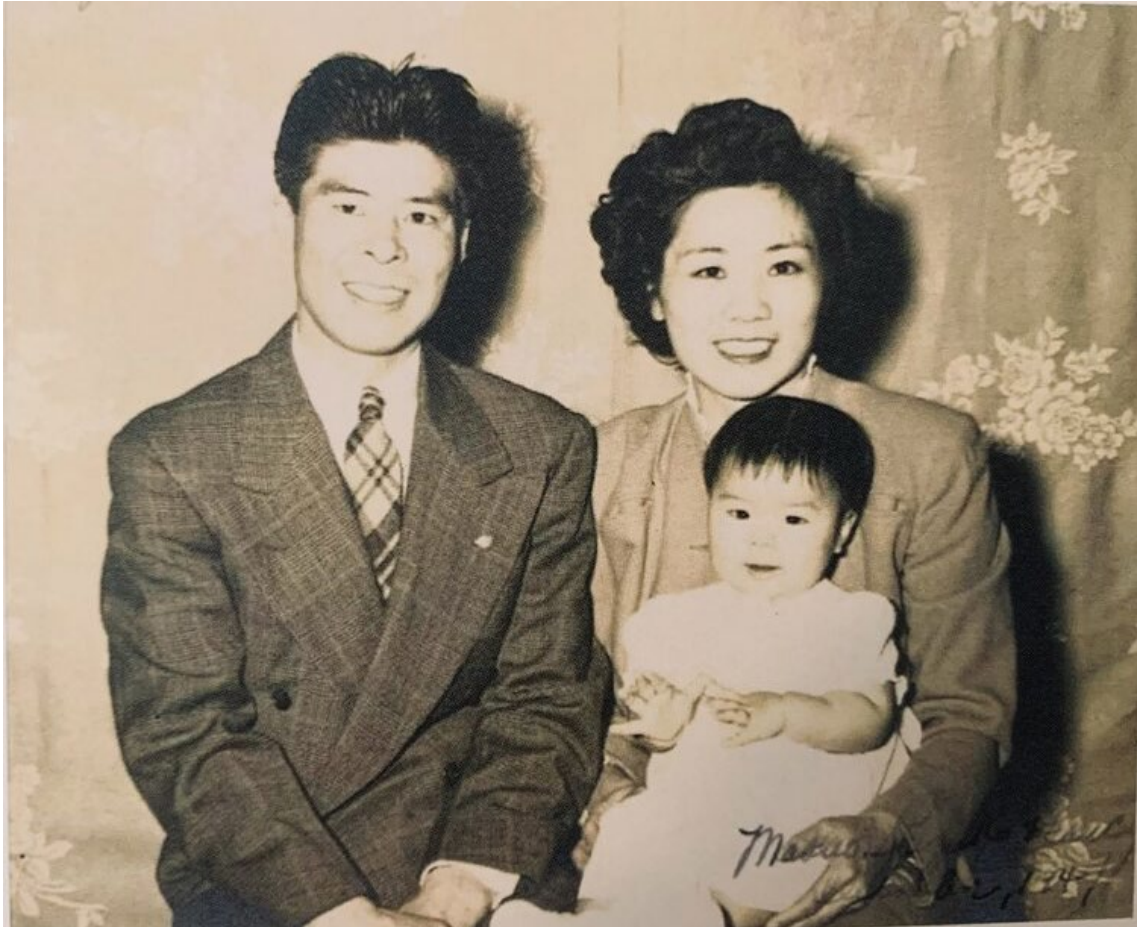




Shizuko Yamauchi



Masao, Shizuko, and Nancy Yamauchi

“All I saw was cots and there were bales of hay or something, straw, that we were supposed to fill the mattress like, for our mattress. That I remember. We just took it, couldn’t be helped, you know. No point in complaining. ”

In the spring of 2019, I was asked to conduct an oral history interview by the daughter of someone who had been in camp at Poston. It was a normal enough request, with one extraordinary fact: The woman I was to interview was 101 years old. At the time of Pearl Harbor Shizuko Yamauchi, then Inao, was 24 years old living in the coastal town of San Luis Obispo with her mother who sold tofu with her sisters. After being in Poston for just over a year, Shizuko left camp early in October of 1943 and headed for the Midwest with aspirations to become a stenographer. She eventually landed a job in Cleveland, married a veteran of the 442nd and became a mother to one daughter, Nancy Teruko (who joined us for the interview). Shizuko was a fixture in the Cleveland Buddhist church until the family moved back to the Newark area of California.

At the time of this interview, Shizuko was in a Japanese assisted living facility in Union City, adjacent to the Buddhist church. But I regret that she was not able to read this interview. She passed at the remarkable age of 102 on November 12, 2019. To live a life like hers with few regrets and a sense of humor, we can only aspire. Though her memories of the camp days and after were sparse, what she did share was sprinkled with plenty of candor and dry wit. After I remarked how beautiful she was in an old black and white photo of herself she chuckled and said plainly, “Well, everybody’s young once.”

What were your parents doing before the war?

Shizuko Yamauchi: What were my parents doing? Farming, I guess.

Nancy Dodd: Her father died when she was seven in an automobile accident. So her mother remarried. She's one of four sisters.

And were you the youngest out of all the sisters?

SY: I was the third [eldest].



Shizuko's parents, Uka and Taihei Ishii and her eldest sister, Masako, around 1914.

And your parents, were they Issei?

SY: My parents were Issei [from] Kumamoto.

Where were you living before the war?

SY: San Luis Obispo.

I haven't heard of many Japanese Americans who lived in San Luis Obispo. I haven't met a lot of families who were from there.

ND: Was it a small community?

SY: It wasn't a really small community. We

had a Japanese school.

And did you go to that school?

SY: I think I did [*laughs*]. It's too long ago.

Do you remember the day Pearl Harbor happened? And do you remember hearing about it?

SY: Oh yes, oh yes, uh huh. I was for Japan and against Japan, you know. But I remember Pearl Harbor.

Do you remember how your parents reacted to it? Your mother and your stepfather.

SY: I think most of us felt like, *shikata ga nai*, it can't be helped. Or, what can we do about it, you know?

Do you remember if there was any kind of backlash after that happened? Were people still kind to your family?

SY: I knew I was wondering how the *hakujin* would feel towards us. But there was no animosity. I didn't feel afraid.

And what were you doing as a young woman at this time? Were you going to school or helping your family?

SY: I was already 25 years old so I wasn't going to school.

You weren't married by then, were you?

SY: No.

ND: Grandma had a boarding house and sold tofu, remember? My grandma would make tofu and she would go around selling the tofu.

So she had this business at the boarding house.

SY: I drove all over to the different houses and sold the tofu.

Do you remember what it was like when you were told to pack up and leave after Pearl Harbor after the Executive Order?

SY: Well I know, I never celebrated Christmas 'cause I'm Buddhist. Well, my mother and I didn't know where they were going to send us. So we didn't know whether we should take clothing for cold weather or warm weather. That I remember, so. But it was *shikata ga nai*, you know? We just had to do what they told us to do, that's all.

Do you remember anything important you had to leave behind?

SY: Well, I know we were renting the place, so we didn't have to worry about that. But I don't remember anything special.

ND: Mom, tell her, you spent your 25th birthday on the train going to Poston. I think she just went direct to Poston.

SY: Yeah, that I remember, that's right. Well everything was *shikata ga nai*, you just had to take what happens, that's all.

What else do you remember about the train ride going to Poston?

SY: Well, I just remember going through looked like desert part but then that's about all. Just sort of wondering, well, just—wherever they take us.

When you got to Poston, what were some of your first impressions of the camp?

SY: Well, all I saw was cots and there were bales of hay or something, straw, that we were supposed to fill the mattress like, for our mattress. That I remember. We just took it, couldn't be helped, you know. No point in complaining [*laughs*].

So do you remember the block you were in with your family?

SY: Block Three. Well I know that we had our bathrooms, to take a shower it was communal, you know. So those who were shy waited until 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning to go. I was old enough, thought what the heck. When you get older, you have, oh heck, it honestly doesn't bother. We're all alike.

Did you make friends in camp?

SY: Oh yes, oh yes. That was fine, you know, making friends in camp. Now I don't know whether those friends are friends from camp or after I got here [in California]. It's all mixed up.

Did you work in camp?

SY: Seems to me, I know for awhile I had to see that the mothers got their milk for their little kids. I don't remember much—oh my. It's too long ago.

What happened with going to Cleveland? How did you end up going?

SY: I went there because my friend was in Columbus. So I thought I'd go to Columbus but by the time I left, she had left Columbus so I just saw that well, Cleveland looks close by I'll go to Cleveland."

Out of all of your sisters, were you the only one to leave Poston?

By then my youngest sister was with her husband. And I was the next. Toshi, one sister was in Hawai'i. And the oldest was with her husband — he was a Kibei/Issei. So we were just separated.

So it was basically just your mom and your stepfather in camp.

SY: By then, I guess. Oh yeah, he was there. I know he had something to do—I knew he had quite a lot of education in Japan but we weren't close. So he had something to do with regarding schooling I suppose. My mother was with her friends. She took advantage of it, she had her close friends and she enjoyed herself. She was able to do things with them so, ah things sort of floated, it didn't matter what was going on.



Shizuko Yamauchi

When you actually left for Cleveland, what did you end up doing?

SY: Well, I got a job sewing at Joy Lingerie.

Did you already know how to sew?

SY: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I had gone to sewing school before camp. Japanese sewing school, yeah. That's where my Japanese improved. It wasn't like what I learned at home, it's a little more refined [laughs]. I kept my mouth shut for a good two weeks, just listening.

Can you still speak it?

SY: In Japanese? In a way, yes. I watch my words when I'm talking with somebody that's from Japan. But then, ah, they know I'm Nisei. They accept me as I am.

So you went to another college in Cleveland?

ND: I think business school.

SY: I—what should I say. It was a period where I didn't use my shorthand typing so that's why I had to catch up on my typing so that's why I had to go there. Well I wanted to be a stenographer. So I was for about 20 years. Had the same boss, yeah.

That doesn't happen anymore. that's very rare.

SY: It was a real nice boss. He used to dictate letters to me and then take off before I typed them out. So I would sign it—initial his name. It worked. He trusted me.

Can you talk about meeting your husband? Did you meet him in Cleveland?

SY: No. He was in the service.

ND: He was in the 442.

SY: Well we had a boarding house, so if they had any leave they would come and stay overnight and go back to the—wherever. So that's how he came to —

So you knew him from San Luis Obispo. Were you corresponding all throughout the war?

SY: Yes, but he was Kibei. So I always guessed that he had somebody write for him but I never asked him.

ND: He was born in Penryn, Loomis. His parents went back to Japan and he came back as a young man on the boat and got a job farming. Then the war

came and he was drafted.

How old was your husband [Masao] when he went into the service?

SY: All I know is we were the same age.

So he was in Europe during the war?

SY: Yeah.

Did he ever talk about his experience and what he went through?

SY: I know that he was in France.

But he survived it, he came home.



Shizuko (far right) and her husband Masao (far left) visit friends in New York in 1946.

SY: Oh yeah.

Where did you meet him again?

SY: Well he came to where I lived because he had no family. He was Kibei, his family was all in Japan so he just showed up one day. Yeah, where I lived, 'cause he had no family.

Did that surprise you? Did you know he was coming back?

SY: Well no. One day there he was.

Were you happy to see him?

SY: Well yeah! More surprised though. I don't think there was any engagement period. There was a Buddhist minister right in camp so yeah, I remember, he came and I don't remember any ring or anything.

ND: And her best friend stood up for them—Mitzi Yokoyama.

SY: My mother made friends with our neighbor, the neighbors were hakujin. I really marveled 'cause my mother didn't speak good English but she spoke broken English, became friends with the hakujin neighbors. She was very outgoing, so we became good friends.

What happened to your stepfather? Did he pass away?

ND: Yeah, he passed away in camp. I never knew my grandfather, or step-grandfather. When mom was pregnant with me my grandma came to live with us 'til I was three years old. So I spoke nothing but Japanese. So off and on, my grandmother would live with her older sister Toshi in Los Angeles.

Your mom sounded like she was a pretty independent lady.

SY: Oh yes, oh yes. She said when she left Japan she had a choice—do you want to go to Hawai'i or America? And she said, "If I'm gonna go far away I want to go far far away." So she came to America, not Hawai'i. She had a lot of spunk [*laughs*].

And when she came to California did she get off in San Francisco? Or how did she end up in San Luis Obispo?

SY: I wonder. I know they all embarked in San Francisco. I don't know.

To Nancy: So you were raised in Cleveland?

ND: Yes I was born and raised in Cleveland.

SY: Church was just the gathering place for all of us. That's where we went on Sundays.

How many children did you have?

SY: Just Nancy.

How long did you live in Cleveland?

SY: Until, I don't know. Until we came here, huh?

ND: My dad was a glazier, he installed mirrors, he cut mirrors in residences, glass. And Cleveland weather — in the wintertime, tornadoes and snow and blizzards and all this stuff. And I went two years at the University of Cincinnati and I came home and Dad said, “Find a college in California to transfer because we want to move back.” So I chose Sacramento State and I graduated in ‘69 and in ‘71 they moved to Newark. It was his occupation. Also the fact that their company that they worked for was not union and he would install huge storefront windows. The next day some guys would throw acid on the window because they were not union so it kind of, you know.

So he got tired of that. And he did the same job when he got to California?

ND: Yeah, they were here a week or so and right away Dad got a job. So they were living in an apartment so Dad said, “Find a house, find a house.” And he and a partner went into partnership in Niles, Fremont area. So he had that — ask my mother how long he had the glass shop.

How long did your husband own the glass shop?

SY: Until we — I don’t know. Ten years or more, I think. But I don’t remember how long.

ND: She took care of the office. She and his partner’s wife took turns in the office.

What was the name of the store?

ND: The Glass Shoppe.

Did he start that business himself or did he take it over from somebody?

SY: Bob was there already and so my husband became a partner. Yeah.

Were you happy to come back to California?

SY: Oh yeah, oh yes. California was home to me.

And where was your mother living?

ND: She was living with Auntie Kay. She lived most of the time with my mom's oldest sister, Toshii. In L.A.

SY: That's right.

When you received the redress and apology letter in the late '80s, what was your feeling when you received the redress?

SY: I don't remember. We did get an apology, huh? Eh, it didn't mean much I guess. I remember getting something but evidently it didn't mean much to me because I don't remember.

By then did you just feel that time in your life was over?

SY: Yeah, that's gone. No point in griping, getting mad about that, you know.

To Nancy: Do you remember what your feelings were when your parents received redress?

ND: I think I was glad because they suffered a lot. They suffered a lot.

Did you ever feel that it interrupted your life in any way?

SY: Oh yes that's something that happened to me, and so what? Yeah it's like anything else that's upsetting, there's no point keeping it in your head and getting upset about it. So shrug and forget about it.

To Nancy: And did your dad ever talk about his experience in the service?

ND: I don't really recall that he talked about you know. But I remember we moved to the suburbs of Cleveland. And my dad would come home and he would say, "Oh I met these people, these guys." They were at a gas station or something and they were bothering the owner and he looked at them and

he spoke German or whatever, you know, my dad and they dissipated. He knew different languages I think.

Did your husband speak different languages?

SY: Well, just Japanese and English.

Because Nancy is saying maybe he spoke German and there were some people were bothering a gas station owner.

SY: Oh he did say some French. I don't know what it was. Probably his girlfriend's name. [*Nancy laughs*].

How did you find out he had a girlfriend in France?

SY: I think, intuition [*laughs*].

When you know, you know. Did you ever feel like your dad came home with any residual PTSD? Or he was okay?

ND: He was okay, I don't think there was any.

How many years were you married?

Gee. 25 [years]?

[To Nancy]: When did your dad pass?

ND: February 2, 1995. He was 76.

Did you ever go visit Japan?

SY: Yes, we went a couple times, huh?

ND: She went with my dad maybe four times. And then when my dad died, his dying wish was that my mom take Stacy and me to Japan to see his folks. So we went in '97.

And Mom gave Stacy a college graduation present that she go to Japan, but not with her boyfriend but with her mother. So we went in 2007.

So you've traveled quite a bit.

SY: Yes, I was lucky. We went to India, too.

Do you feel that you are 101?

SY: After 100 who counts? *[laughs]*



Shizuko and her granddaughter, Stacy

Is there anything you would want your granddaughter to know about your life — some wisdom, or something you feel is important?

SY: Oh yeah. Tell her “you get old too soon” *[laughs]*.

And meaning, what exactly? Live life or if you want to do something, you should do it?

SY: Yeah. All I know is you get old too soon. But that's okay, I'm satisfied with what I have been through. And I think I've been fortunate, so. I've traveled to places that others, my friends have not, so I've been very fortunate. I'm thankful for that. I don't have many regrets, if any.

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